"Focus on a Changing Japan – The National Security Dimension"

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There exists today a general consensus among security and foreign policy experts that the US-Japanese security relationship is the best it has ever been. Over the space of the past few years, Japan has increased substantially its role in international security while bolstering the US-Japanese alliance. The Japanese Self Defense Forces are performing a broader range of missions across a wider geographic area than ever, including offering logistical support for coalition naval forces in the Indian Ocean and assisting with the reconstruction of Iraq. Japanese diplomats and political leaders are coordinating their efforts with the United States highly sensitive security issues such as North Korea and the Taiwan Straits. And Japan is moving to further integrate itself with the United States in a number of different strategic areas, most notably with its decision to support the development and deployment of a Ballistic Missile Defense system in Asia.

As a result of these efforts, the primary danger that faced the U.S.-Japanese alliance only a decade ago – the danger that Japan would fail to respond to a regional crisis and thus undermine its relationship with the United States – has dissipated. At the same time, by strengthening its security relationship with the United States and participating in international peace keeping and reconstruction missions, Japan is making a substantial contribution to East Asian stability. There can be little doubt that it is in the interest of both nations that this trend be continued and reinforced.

This having been said, it is necessary to acknowledge that not everything is sunshine and light in Japan's new foreign policy stance. Some of the reasons for Japan's closer strategic relationship with the United States – namely its growing isolation form the rest of North East Asia – are not entirely positive. Differences remain between the United States and Japan on a number of important security issues, and there are other areas where serious difficulties could emerge. Two problem spots in particular stand out. First, there is a real danger of a domestic political backlash in Japan against its strategic integration with the United States. Such a backlash could undo much of the progress that has been made over the past decade.. Second, Japan's new international security role is feeding a trend towards increased nationalism not only in Japan, but in South Korea and the People's Republic of China as well. The conditions are ripe for a kind of "perfect storm" of nationalist passions, one that heightens tensions in the region and could turn what should be relatively minor disputes over territorial issues and symbolic issues into full blown crises.

The Long March towards a true Alliance

To appreciate how far the U.S.-Japanese alliance has come, as well as how far it could still go, it is worth briefly reviewing the overall trajectory of the relationship since its inception. Four phases are identifiable

In the beginning, the standard line was that the Mutual Security Treaty was something of a misnomer: it was not at all mutual; it was only partially secure; and many observers felt it was not even much of a Treaty. Established at the end of the US occupation, it was essentially a US security guarantee in return for Japanese alignment in the Cold War and the provision of military bases. Faced with only a minimal direct security threat from the Communist powers, Japan was fearful of becoming overly entangled in potentially costly conflicts in Asia (Korea, Vietnam). As a result, it restricted the degree to which its fledgling Self Defense Forces cooperated with their counterparts in the U.S. military. The United States, for its part, was forced to content itself with denying Japan's substantial industrial resources to the Communist powers and relied on its bases in Japan to help contain Communism in the Far East. Despite repeated US efforts to get the Japanese to play a larger role, there was little formal military-to-military contact between the two sides and relatively little coordination on broader strategic military issues,.

In the late 1970s and the first half of the1990s this state of affairs changed as a result of a massive Soviet military build up in the Far East. Faced with the emergence of a serious Soviet threat to Japan's vital sea lines of communication and to the northern island of Hokkaido, Japan embarked on a significant upgrading its force structures and intensified its military ties to the United States. The centerpiece of this new relationship was the 1978 Guidelines on US-Japanese Defense cooperation, which allowed the Japanese Self Defense Forces to plan and train together with US military forces. Nonetheless, Japan continued to allocate only a fraction of its resources to military defense (approximately 1% if GDP) and cooperation with the United States remained strictly limited to the defense of Japan.

After the Cold War, many in Japan briefly hoped that it would become less reliant on the United States for its security, possibly through the creation of an Asian multilateral security regimes. These hopes were soon dispelled by a series of crises: the first Gulf War in 1990-1991, the first Korean nuclear crisis in 1994 and the 1996 crisis in the Taiwan Straits. In response, Japan expanded its international military activities, allowing the JSDF to participate in international peace keeping operations and by refurbishing its security relationship with the United States. Essentially, Japan indicated that it was willing to provide logistical and other forms of support to US military operations on a regional basis.

9/11 led to a dramatic expansion of the geographical scope of Japanese support for the United States. Determined to avoid a repeat of Japan's failure to act in the first Gulf War, the Koizumi government moved with remarkable alacrity to dispatch Japanese naval forces to the Indian Ocean (where they provided as much as 50% of the fuel used by coalition naval forces backing US operations in Afghanistan) and, later, to deploy 600

Ground Self Defense Forces to assist in the reconstruction of Iraq. Japan also indicated that it was willing to participate in a BMD system in East Asia, a step that promises to further significantly integrate Japan's intelligence and command and control functions with those of the United States.

Underlying the post Cold War shift in Japanese policy has been the basic calculation that the U.S.-Japanese security treaty relationship continues to serve vital Japanese national interests. Japan recognizes that in Asia, unlike in Western Europe, there remain many serious potential security threats even after the old Soviet threat has receded. In theory, Japan has the wherewithal to provide for its own security. With the world's second largest economy, an abundance of skilled scientists and engineers, and large, highly sophisticated military, aerospace and nuclear power industries, Japan could – if it so desired – field in a relatively short period of time (less than five years) the most formidable military in East Asia, replete with a very substantial nuclear arsenal. However, the Japanese government believes that doing so will a) cost a great deal economcally, b) increase regional tensions, c) damage its relations with the United States and thus d) make Japan less, not more secure. Reliance on the United States seems much the preferable option. To maintain the relationship, however, Japanese leaders appreciate that more will have to be done in the future than during the Cold War.

Japan still remains a long way from being the Britain of the Far East that many analysts have hoped it would become. The Japanese public remains instinctively suspicious of the military both as an institution and as an instrument of foreign policy. In addition, there remains a fundamental fear in many quarters of entanglement, that if the Japanese armed forces become overly integrated into American strategy they may drag Japan into costly struggles that do not serve Japanese national interest. The Japanese Self Defense forces legally are prohibited from engaging in combat except in the defense of Japan. To this day, the US-Japanese relationship remains a highly asymmetrical one insofar as the United States is committed to the defense of Japan while, under the current interpretation of its constitution, Japan is prohibited from coming to the aid of the US if it is attacked.

This being said, the changes in Japan's security role are impressive and are likely to continue in the future, even after the probable departure of the notably pro-defense Prime Minister Koizumi. There are two reasons for this relatively optimistic prognosis: Changes that have occurred in Japanese domestic politics and rising tensions with its Asian neighbors.

As to the first, the domestic forces that traditionally opposed an expansion of Japan's military role, the old Japanese left centered on the Socialist and Communist parties, have essentially evaporated. While the preference for a non-military' "soft power" approach remains strong, especially in the Democratic Party of Japan and in the LDP's coalition partners (the Clean Government Party) Japan today is far more ready to countenance the use of the military than was true only a decade ago. Inside the Democratic Party there are many security realists who are likely to support the continuation of current policies (with some modifications).

Second, Japan's growing isolation in North East Asia is creating a deep sense of unease in Tokyo and is propelling Japanese leaders to look to the United States for support and reassurance. First and foremost on the list of Tokyo's strategic concerns is the threat emanating from North Korea. Korea's repeated missile tests, especially the 1998 launch of the Taepodong missile, as well as evidence of North Korean espionage operations inside Japan, demonstrates the existence of a capacity to threaten Japan. Repeated hostile statements, including Pyongyang's September 2004 threat to turn Japan into "a sea of fire" demonstrate its hostile intent. The much publicized plight of Japanese citizens who have been abducted by North Korean agents, as well the numerous reports in the Japanese media concerning the immense suffering of the North Korean people, has underlined the malignant nature of the Pyongyang regime. For ordinary Japanese, evil now has a human face: the face of Kim Song Il.

Perhaps even more disturbing to Japan are the growing tensions with the People's Republic of China. Although the two nations are more integrated economically than ever, and share common interests across a broad range of issues, on a fundamental level, neither side trusts or likes the other. China fears Japan's potential military power and is convinced that its professions of pacifism are a sham. Japan for its part is alarmed by China's growing military capabilities and is alienated by the rising tide of anti-Japanese nationalistic sentiments. A number of factors exacerbate these tensions. They include differences over territorial issues (the Senkaku/Diaoyutai island and the demarcation of Japan's and China's exclusive economic zones in the Sea of Japan); the growing competition between Beijing and Tokyo for energy resources; and perhaps most volatile of all, differences over how the two countries view recent Asian history. As a result, the mood in Tokyo has become dramatically more hostile towards China over the past decade, leading to the slashing of Japanese foreign aid to the PRC and a willingness to confront Beijing over sensitive issues such as Taiwan and Yasukuni.

Despite these newly intensifying threats, in the end Japan remains reluctant to commit itself fully to a confrontational course with its Asian neighbors. WMD proliferation and counter terrorism remain a lower priority for Tokyo than for Washington. In the event of an outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula, Japan is far more vulnerable to North Korean retaliation than is the United States. Japan is therefore more likely to prefer a diplomatic solution to the crises, and less willing than the US is to contemplate options that could lead to military escalation.

In the same vein, Japan realizes that in the long run it will need to accommodate itself to a rising Chinese superpower. While from an American point of view China may become a potential challenger, for Japan it is also an inescapable neighbor. Many Japanese believe that a weak, insecure and unstable China could pose an even more problems than a strong and assertive one. Japan's preferred solution for dealing with China is to engage it economically and politically in order to eventually integrate it into the international system as a peaceful, prosperous, status quo oriented power.

At the same time, Japan is less convinced than it was a decade ago that engagement with China will bring about a positive transformation any time soon. While Japan will

continue to pursue a policy aimed at strengthening multilateral security institutions at both the regional and global levels, such efforts will remain subordinate to Japan's over-riding interest in maintaining and strengthening the alliance relationship with the United States. Eventually, most Japanese continue to hope that a combination of allied firmness together with a growing network of economic, cultural and political ties with its neighbors will bring about a more relaxed atmosphere in the region. This, however, is likely to be a task that will require not years but decades to come to fruition.

Storm Clouds

In the near future, however, there are two serious strategic problems confronting Japan and the United States today that need to be addressed.

First, there exists the serious danger that at some point a domestic political backlash will emerge against the recent trend towards Japan's strategic integration with the United States. While Japanese public opinion has so far been tolerant of recent shifts in Japanese defense policy, this could quickly change if Japan's new overseas commitments turn out to be costly ones. There is a general fear in the Japanese public that Japan is easily manipulated by the United States. Even many pro-defense Japanese policy makers worry that their relationship with the United States is too one sided.

To ameliorate these concerns it is necessary to do three things. First, the United States needs to take steps that demonstrate that the United States is respectful of Japanese interests. The recent US insistence that Japan be included in the six power talks with North Korea, as well as expressions of US support for Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the Security Council are excellent examples of the kind of things the US can, and should continue to do in the future. Second, the United States will need to be cautious about the type of missions it pushes Japan to accept. While the Iraq mission has been relatively successful, there remains the danger that Japan's involvement in such operations may lead to significant Japanese losses. If those losses seem to have been incurred purely for American, not Japanese, interests, the domestic repercussions may be severe. The example of the impact of the Madrid bombings on the Aznar government offers a sobering example of the kinds of problems that could develop. Finally, mechanisms must be created that demonstrate that Japanese interests carry weight in American strategic decision making. Current, bilateral efforts, such as the "two plus two" talks, are a good first step. In the long run, the creation of broader multilateral frameworks, including other American democratic allies in the region, would lend greater legitimacy to Japan's expanded international security role. Unfortunately, at the current point in time, the prospects for creating such mechanisms are rather bleak.

The second major problem is that Japan's new defense activism is generating tensions in its relations with China and South Korea. These tensions have become increasingly evident in the flare up of Chinese and South Korean sentiments regarding Japan's supposed unwillingness to confront the history of Japanese Imperial aggression in the first half of the twentieth century.. In reality, over the course of the past decade, Tokyo

has made some serious efforts to reconcile itself with its neighbors over the so-called "history issue." Japanese leaders from Prime Minister Hosokawa in the early 1990s on have offered apologies for the conduct of Japanese Imperial forces in Asia. The Japanese government, working with civil society groups, has tried to identify, apologize to and offer compensation to former Asian and European Comfort Women (over five hundred have in fact been so compensated). The large majority of Japanese high school and even middle school textbooks, carry references to the history of Japanese atrocities and aggression in Asia. In short, the notion that Japan suffers from sort of "historical amnesia" is a myth.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that Japan's efforts at coming clean on the "history issue" have been undercut by a vocal and politically influential right wing. The Japanese Right challenges what it sees as a "self-flagellating" approach to national history and has lobbied vigorously for the promotion of a healthy sense of patriotism. There has been a historical tendency for the Japanese Right to promote its views at times when Japan moves to expand its international security role. Many in the Koizumi government are sympathetic to the right-wing, and Koizumi himself has made a point of promoting Japanese patriotism by repeatedly visiting the Yasukuni shrine, dedicated to the two and half million Japanese soldiers and sailors who have died fighting modern Japan's many wars. In this sense, Japan's new defense role is linked to the emergence of a new Japanese nationalism.

This new Japanese nationalism, however, remains a far cry from its prewar counterpart. For the most part, its impact on the Japanese populace as a whole is relatively limited, and it is certainly not linked to an aggressive assertion of Japanese interest abroad. Instead, it is a rather defensive, "Japan should stand tall" sort of national pride Unfortunately, it is coming at a time when domestic political factors are spurring populist forces in both China and South Korea. Combined with the apprehensions over Japan's new international security role, the conditions are set for a prolonged period of heightened tensions in the region. There is a very real possibility that things can get out of hand, possibly as a result of violence against innocent Japanese or Chinese citizens residing in each others countries. The economic damage that even the limited unrest seen so far can inflict is considerable. Down the line, more serious, militarized confrontations are not entirely implausible.

Defusing this problem is likely to be a difficult, long-lasting process. Domestic political sensitivities are high on all sides. Moreover, after more than a decade of unsuccessful grappling with the issue of Japanese war guilt, a mood of apology fatigue has set in in Tokyo. Nonetheless, Japan as well as China and South Korea should be encouraged to come to terms with the issue by embarking on an intensified dialogue. The best forum for such a dialogue would be through so-called "Track II" channels where government officials together with scholars and representatives from civil society groups coe together on a bilateral basis (Korean-Japanese and Chinese-Japanese basis) to discuss these issues and draft concrete proposals for policy makers. While the United States should not necessarily be a party in of such talks,. American and other foreign representatives could play a useful mediating role in such meetings and offer "best

practice' advice drawn from a wide range of other cases dealing with reconciliation on historical issues.

Conclusions

The good news from Asia is that Japan is at last getting serious about creating a more balanced alliance relationship. Active Japanese participation in international security affairs can go a long way in alleviating American concerns about burden sharing and help maintain a balance of power that favors the spread of peace and prosperity in the Asian region. The bad news is that in so doing Japan inadvertently is sparking an upsurge in nationalist sentiment and acrimony in the region. On balance, the positive implications of this development outweigh the negative ones. Certainly this is true from the narrow perspective of the US-Japanese alliance. If concerns outlined above are addressed, it should be true from a general Asian point of view as well.